

Disability, Voter Turnout, and Polling Place Accessibility

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Overview

1. Voter turnout in 2008 and 2010 elections
2. Breakdowns by age, disability type, and employment status
3. Voting early and by mail
4. Why the lower turnout?
5. Role of polling place accessibility
 - GAO and Rutgers studies
 - Planned new survey in 2012
6. Conclusion plus list of accompanying material

Data on disability and voter turnout

- Studies of the 1992 to 2004 elections, using a range of disability measures, showed turnout to be 4-21 percentage points lower among people with disabilities than among people without disabilities.

Data on disability and voter turnout

- Census Bureau introduced a new disability measure to the monthly survey in 2008, allowing analysis of over 90,000 voting-age citizens in 2008 and 2010 elections.
- Census disability measure is based on 6 questions that capture major impairments, but may undercount people with mental impairments and certain conditions like cancer and epilepsy.

Estimated turnout based on Census data

	<u>2008</u>	<u>2010</u>
Millions of voters with disabilities	14.7	11.0
Percent voting among eligible citizens		
Disability	57%	43%
No disability	64%	46%
Disability gap	-7%	-3%

But apparent closing of gap from 2008 to 2010 is misleading, reflecting disproportionate drop in voting among young, who are less likely to have disabilities. See next slide . . .

Disability turnout gaps by age group

	<u>2008</u>	<u>2010</u>
Age 18-34	-12%	-11%
Age 35-49	-17%	-16%
Age 50-64	-12%	-14%
Age 65+	-12%	-14%

- ⇒ Older people are more likely to vote in general, and also more likely to have disabilities
- ⇒ Holding age constant, the disability turnout gap in 2010 widens from 3 points to 11-16 points
- ⇒ Disability gaps by age group are similar between 2008 and 2010

2010 voter turnout by type of disability

Turnout is lowest among those with cognitive impairments, and those who have difficulty inside or outside the home:

All people with disabilities	43%
Cognitive impairment	30%
Difficulty inside the home	32%
Difficulty going outside alone	33%
Visual impairment	40%
Mobility impairment	44%
Hearing impairment	50%

Further breakdowns of voter turnout

- No difference in voter turnout between employed people with and without disabilities, suggesting positive role of employment in closing disability gap
- But majority of working-age people with disabilities are not employed, and their turnout is lower than for non-employed people without disabilities
- Accompanying fact sheet also shows breakdowns by sex, region, and state

Voting early or by mail

How voted in 2010	Disability	No disability	Gap
At polling place on election day	63%	75%	-12%
At polling place before election day	10%	8%	2%
By mail on election day	2%	2%	0%
By mail before election day	26%	15%	11%

⇒ Voting by mail may especially help those with mobility problems

⇒ But even with option of voting by mail, voter turnout is lower among people with disabilities

Disability registration gap

	Disability	No disability
Registered to vote in 2010	64%	65%

⇒ Registration gap is only 1%, so turnout gap is not primarily due to registration gap

Why is turnout lower among people with disabilities?

Political scientists divide factors affecting political participation into 3 categories:

- resources (“Are you able to participate?”)
- recruitment (“Did anyone ask you to participate?”)
- psychological factors (“Do you want to participate?”)

Each category plays a role in the lower turnout of people with disabilities, but gap not fully explained by standard factors

⇒ see accompanying articles from Political Research Quarterly and Encyclopedia of Disability

Role of polling place accessibility

Inaccessible polling places impede the ability to vote, and can have psychological effects by sending the message that people with disabilities are not welcome in the political sphere.

GAO report in 2008 found only 27% of polling places were fully accessible.

Rutgers national survey in 2000

National survey of voting-age citizens found people with disabilities were more likely to encounter, or expect to encounter, problems in voting at a polling place

	Disability	No disability
Voters who reported some difficulty in voting	6%	2%
Non-voters who would expect to encounter difficulties in voting	33%	2%

Types of problems in voting at polling place reported by voters with disabilities in 2000

General mobility (walking, standing)	12%
Getting to polling place	21%
Difficulties at polling place	66%
Process was confusing	25%
Physical difficulty with ballot or machine	18%
Difficulty seeing or reading ballot	16%
Officials were not helpful enough	18%

(Total sums to more than 100% because multiple problems may be reported.)

National survey to be done in 2012

- National randomized survey of voting-age citizens, with funding from EAC, as part of Research Alliance on Accessible Voting
- Sample will be representative, except people with disabilities will be oversampled to focus on their experiences: 2000 people with disabilities, 1000 people without disabilities
- Telephone survey will use standard procedures, with additional measures to ensure participation by the full range of people with disabilities

National survey to be done in 2012 (cont.)

- Survey will investigate polling place accessibility for those who voted in 2012, and past and expected accessibility problems for those who didn't vote in 2012
- Analysis will provide overall portrait of polling place accessibility in 2012, with comparisons between people with and without disabilities, and among major types of disability

Importance of polling place accessibility

Is voting by mail an acceptable alternative? In the 2000 Rutgers survey, over one-third of people—both with and without disabilities—said that voting by mail is not as good as voting in person.

- ⇒ Many people like the act of going to a polling place to participate in democracy with their fellow citizens, rather than marking a ballot in isolation at home.
- ⇒ Inaccessible polling places send a message about who is expected to participate
- ⇒ Turnout gap persists even with option of voting by mail

Disability is not a partisan issue

Other survey evidence shows people with disabilities are very similar to people with disabilities in likelihood of:

- Being a Democrat or a Republican
- Being liberal or conservative

(See accompanying “Sidelined or Mainstreamed?” paper by Schur and Adya)

Conclusion

- Voter turnout is lower among citizens with disabilities
- Inaccessible polling places can impede turnout, creating both physical and psychological barriers
- Accessible polling places help ensure people with disabilities are fully welcome and included in the political sphere
- On-going research will track progress in increasing polling place accessibility

Accompanying material

1. “Fact Sheet on Disability and Voter Turnout in the 2010 Elections,” by Lisa Schur and Douglas Kruse, May 2011.
2. “Voting,” by Lisa Schur, Todd Shields, and Kay Schriener, in Gary Albrecht, ed., Encyclopedia of Disability (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005).
3. “Enabling Democracy: Disability and Voter Turnout,” by Lisa Schur et al., Political Research Quarterly, Vol. 55, No. 1, March 2002.
4. “Sidelined or Mainstreamed? Political Participation and Attitudes of People with Disabilities in the United States,” by Lisa Schur and Meera Adya, October 2010.